

Best Practices

**that Promote Learning of
General Education Curriculum Content for
Students with the Most Significant Disabilities**

DRAFT



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Beyond Access is a four-year Model Demonstration Project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs that promotes improved learning of general education curriculum content by students with the most significant disabilities. The project will assist school teams to learn, implement, and refine a student supports and team professional development model that blends best practices in inclusive education, augmentative communication, collaborative teaming, and professional development.

IDEA 1997 requires that students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum; that “to the maximum extent appropriate” they pursue learning goals that are “consistent with those of students without disabilities”; and that they be included in district and state large-scale assessments. For students who have traditionally been given labels of mental retardation, autism, deaf-blindness, traumatic brain injury, and multiple disabilities, realization of these goals presents significant challenges. In many schools, access to the general education curriculum occurs in segregated settings and the standards that students pursue are minimally related to the academic content of that curriculum, focusing primarily on “access” skills. Although these practices may address IDEA’s legal requirements, they fall far short of meeting the spirit of IDEA that places presumptive value on general education class placement and the goal that every student graduate with a high school diploma. Furthermore, even when students are enrolled in general education classes, staff may not have access to high quality professional development around evolving best practices, effective team functioning, and leadership skills.

Thus the Beyond Access project was proposed to refine, demonstrate, and evaluate a comprehensive model that links planning of students’ instructional supports with professional development to improve team functioning. It is comprised of four dynamic, recursive phases:

- q Phase 1: Conduct a Baseline Assessment of Student Learning and Communication Skills, Supports, School and Classroom Contexts, and Team Effectiveness;
- q Phase 2: Explore and Describe Possible Student Support Plans and Team Member Support and Professional Development Plans;
- q Phase 3: Observe and Document Patterns of Student and Team Performance; and,
- q Phase 4: Review and Reflect on Student and Team Performance Data and Implement Recommended Changes in Student and Team Support Plans.

A National Review Panel of parents, consumers, and professionals will support project implementation and evaluation efforts.

Best Practices in the Beyond Access Model

A wide array of practices from the fields of inclusive education, augmentative communication, authentic assessment, and high quality professional development for staff form the theoretical foundations of the model. Practices were selected using several criteria, represented by the following questions:

- q Does this practice have a strong research base?
- q Does this practice embody a belief in the inherent worth of people with significant disabilities?
- q Does this practice lead to students' valued membership in general education classes?
- q Does this practice hold high expectations for students' capabilities and achievement?
- q Does this practice honor family culture, vision, and preferences?
- q Is this practice consistent with quality general education?

Model demonstration site teams will be supported to implement these practices in their daily work, collect student and team performance data, reflect on the meaning of those data, and then modify their practice accordingly.

This document is a compilation of the draft *best practices* used in the Beyond Access Model. These include: High Expectations and Least Dangerous Assumption; General Education Class Membership and Full Participation; Quality Augmentative and Alternative Communication; Curriculum, Instruction, and Supports; Ongoing Authentic Assessment; Family-School Partnerships; Team Collaboration; Special and General Education Reform; and Professional Development. Within each category, a list of specific indicators offers observable measures of the best practices.

This document is intended for use during implementation of the Beyond Access model by demonstration sites during project years one through three. Input about the relevance of these practices will be sought from project site teams and from members of the Beyond Access National Panel of Experts.

After reflecting on this feedback, a final draft of the document will be produced and disseminated in year 4 of the project.

High Expectations and Least Dangerous Assumption

The inherent value and dignity of students with significant disabilities is respected. All students with significant disabilities pursue the same learner outcomes as students without disabilities. When students do not currently demonstrate content knowledge or skills, the least dangerous assumption principle applies, and all aspects of their educational programs continue to reflect high expectations.

Indicators

- q "People First" language is used.
- q Language regarding the student's functioning or developmental level is not used; rather, descriptions of the student focus on abilities and needs.
- q Annual goals on the student's IEP reflect content standards from the general education curriculum.
- q Predictions are not made that the student will "never" acquire certain knowledge or skills.
- q People speak directly to the student rather than through a paraprofessional or other person.
- q People use age-appropriate vocabulary and inflection when talking to the student.
- q In order to respect privacy, staff discuss the student's personal care, medical needs, and other sensitive issues out of earshot of other students, and only with those who need to know.

General Education Class Membership and Full Participation

Students with significant disabilities are members of age-appropriate general education classes in their neighborhood schools. There are no programs or rooms just for students with significant disabilities and these students have access to the full range of learning experiences and environments offered to students without disabilities.

Indicators

- q The student is a member of an age-appropriate general education class.
- q The student attends the school he/she would attend if he/she didn't have a disability.
- q The student progresses through the grades according to the same pattern as students without disabilities.
- q The student marches at graduation at the average age at which other classmates without disabilities graduate.
- q The student receives a diploma when he/she is discharged from special education.
- q The student learns in outside-of-school, age-appropriate, and inclusive environments after the age of 18 and before he/she receives a high school diploma or is discharged from special education.
- q The student is not pulled out of general education classes for academic instruction.
- q Related services are delivered primarily through consultation in the classroom.
- q Related services are delivered in typical, inclusive environments.
- q There are no places or programs just for students with disabilities.
- q Students with disabilities are proportionally represented in classes, courses, clubs, and extracurricular activities.

- q The student's name is on all class lists, lists of groups put on the board, job lists, etc.
- q The student receives the same materials as students without disabilities, with supports (i.e., accommodations and adaptations) provided as necessary.
- q The student participates in classroom and school routines in typical locations, such as the Pledge of Allegiance, lunch count, jobs, errands, eating lunch in the cafeteria, etc.
- q The student rides the same school bus as his/her peers without disabilities.
- q The student passes classes with other students, arriving and leaving at the same time.
- q The student participates in classroom instruction in similar ways as students without disabilities; for example:
 - whole class discussions
 - at the board
 - in small groups
 - when called on by the teacher
- q The student participates in school plays, field trips, and community service activities.
- q The school is physically accessible.
- q The school can accommodate the student's sensory needs.

Quality Augmentative and Alternative Communication

Students with significant disabilities are provided with accurate and reliable augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) supports and services that enable them to communicate about the content of the academic curriculum and in social situations with adults and age-appropriate classmates.

Indicators

- q The student has a means to communicate all the time.
- q The student communicates for a variety of purposes.
- q Although the student may have multiple ways of communicating, a primary means of communication is identified.
- q The student's communication system is programmed with messages to demonstrate learning of age-appropriate core academics, commensurate with his/her age-appropriate classmates.
- q The student's communication system is programmed with messages for social communication that promote his/her participation in school and community extracurricular activities with peers without disabilities.
- q AAC systems are provided to enable the student to communicate for the purposes of self-determination and futures planning.
- q Supports are provided to enable the student to communicate for the purpose of self-determination and futures planning.
- q The student, his/her family members, and classmates without disabilities participate in the selection of messages programmed into the AAC system.
- q When acting as a facilitator, people clearly engage in a support role, not actively participating in the content of the interaction between the student using AAC and his/her conversational partners.

- q When conversing with the student as a conversational partner, classmates and adults utilize information provided by facilitators to converse directly with the student, not with the facilitator.
- q Training and support to use the AAC system is provided to the student in the contexts and routines in which the student will communicate.
- q Training and support to use the AAC system is provided to the team, including classmates, in the contexts and routines in which the student will communicate.
- q AAC supports take into consideration the communicative functions of challenging behavior.
- q A variety of funding sources and streams (Medicaid, Medicare, private insurance, school funding, etc.) are utilized to acquire and maintain assistive technology and AAC systems, and to support training of the student, his/her family, classmates, and support personnel.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Supports

Curriculum and instruction are designed to accommodate the full range of student diversity. Individualized supports are provided to students with significant disabilities to enable them to fully participate and make progress within the general education curriculum. Students learn functional or life skills within typical routines in the general education classroom or other inclusive activities and environments.

Indicators

Curriculum is...

- q Based on common content standards for all students.
- q Presented in a variety of accessible formats including written information at appropriate reading levels, and in formats as indicated on the student support plan (e.g., video, picture/symbols, actual objects, demonstrations, orally, etc.).
- q Individualized through the development of personalized performance demonstrations for some students.

Instruction...

- q Reflects the learning styles of all students in the class by the use of visual, tactile, and kinesthetic materials and experiences.
- q Prioritizes the use of research-based strategies for increasing student achievement, such as:
 - Identifying similarities and differences
 - Summarizing and note taking
 - Reinforcing effort and providing recognition
 - Homework and practice
 - Nonlinguistic representations
 - Cooperative learning
 - Setting objectives and providing feedback
 - Generating and testing hypotheses
 - Questions, cues, and advance organizers

- q Is provided in multiple formats such as individual, pairs, small groups, and whole class.

Supports...

- q Are provided within the general education class and other typical environments to enable the student to participate in and benefit from the general education curriculum and other inclusive learning opportunities and activities.
- q Are defined by the student's support plan, and may include: physical, emotional, and sensory supports; adapted materials; assistive technology and AAC; personalized performance demonstrations; personalized instruction; and individualized grading and evaluation plans.
- q For behavior take into consideration the student's sensory needs.
- q For positive behavior are designed after completion of a functional behavioral assessment.
- q For individual student behavior focus on improving quality of life and on teaching new skills, rather than on punishment.
- q Are consistent with a schoolwide positive behavior philosophy.

Evaluation and Grading...

- q Includes criteria for judging success that reflects general education curriculum standards and individualized IEP goals and objectives.
- q Reflects benchmarks similar to those of students without disabilities.
- q Reflects evaluation methods similar to those of students without disabilities.
- q Allows the student to receive grades that reflect "personal best" achievement and improvement.

Ongoing Authentic Assessment

Authentic, performance-based assessments are conducted within typical activities in inclusive environments for the purpose of identifying students' learning and communication styles, preferences and interests, academic strengths and weaknesses, and need for support.

Indicators

- q Present level of performance statements on the IEP reflect the:
 - student's talents, abilities, skills
 - students' learning styles
 - student's preferences
 - supports that the student needs to learn well
- q Assessment reports reflect the student's abilities and needs rather than deficits and weaknesses.
- q If the student has difficulty communicating, assessment tools and strategies are chosen accordingly.
- q Teachers and related service providers use ongoing dynamic assessments instead of discrete, one-time assessment tools.

Family-School Partnerships

Families and schools are engaged in partnership to create quality inclusive educational experiences for students with significant disabilities. Families are connected to resources for developing their own leadership and advocacy skills.

Indicators

- q School staff respect families' cultural background when developing and implementing their children's educational programs.
- q Family priorities are reflected in annual goals on the student's IEP.
- q Families acknowledge teachers' efforts on behalf of their child.
- q Families know about resources for building their own leadership and advocacy skills relative to their child's education.
- q Families attend case-management meetings or curriculum planning meetings on a regular basis.

Team Collaboration

General and special education teachers and related service providers demonstrate shared responsibility by collaborating in the design, implementation, and evaluation of students' educational programs and their IEPs.

Indicators

- q The roles and responsibilities of all teachers and staff reflect the commitment and skills needed to teach all students, including those with disabilities.
- q Special education staff work within the general education classroom as co-teachers, team-teachers, small group instructors, or one-on-one support teachers for all students in the class.
- q The roles and responsibilities of special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers reflect the provision of supports and services to students to enable them to participate in and benefit from the general education curriculum and to teachers to enable them to effectively teach heterogeneous classes.
- q There is collaborative planning time during the day for general and special education teachers, and related service providers.
- q Teams use formal processes for conducting meetings, problem-solving, making decisions, and evaluating their own effectiveness.

Special and General Education Reform

Administrators provide leadership to align general and special education reform and improvement with respect to the creation of a community of learners that is inclusive of students with significant disabilities.

Indicators

- q The values of diversity and inclusion are evident in the school's mission statement.
- q General and special education administrators promote the values and benefits of inclusive education at meetings, in school improvement plans or annual reports, in school newsletters or Web sites, and in conversations.
- q General and special education personnel participate together in schoolwide improvement and reform efforts that benefit students with and without disabilities.

Professional Development

Professional development for general and special education staff is linked to improved educational outcomes for students with significant disabilities.

Indicators

- q Teams use reflective practice strategies and structures to engage in job-embedded learning and professional growth.
- q General and special education staff attend professional development events together.
- q General education staff identify learning about students with disabilities in their professional development plans.
- q Special education staff identify learning about general education topics in their professional development plans.
- q Regular review of student learning data informs the content and format of district, school, and individual professional development plans.

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